

RECONSIDERING “SWIMMING:” THOMAS EAKINS AND THE CHANGING
LANDSCAPES OF MODERNITY IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY PHILADELPHIA

Laura Fravel

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in the Department of Art and Art History.

Chapel Hill
2011

Approved by:

Ross Barrett

Carol Magee

Daniel Sherman

©2011
Laura Fravel
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

LAURA FRAVEL: Reconsidering “Swimming:” Thomas Eakins and the Changing
Landscapes of Modernity in Late Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia
(Under the direction of Ross Barrett)

Thomas Eakins’ *Swimming* pictures a transitory moment caught between two historically-specific community forms. While the earlier rural moment had been defined by accessibility and egalitarian leisure, the later suburban moment was defined by exclusive recreation and class homogeneity. Set near Bryn Mawr, an affluent suburb of Philadelphia promoted by the Pennsylvania Railroad, the painting encapsulates the tension between an imagined pastoral past and a modern state of metropolitan interconnectedness. This thesis will use a variety of period sources—including urban guidebooks, advertisements, and literature—to examine the ways in which *Swimming* engages the complicated and conflicted cultural vision of the outer city. While earlier scholarship has centered on the personal, professional and cultural identities of the figures within the painting, this thesis instead uses the activity of the figures within the space of the painting to inform larger cultural interpretations of the suburban landscape in which the work is set.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the guidance and support of my thesis committee in the completion of this project. I would also like to extend my thanks to the Lower Merion Historical Society and to the Lower Merion Library System for their efforts to document local history. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the librarians at the University of North Carolina for their assistance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. CRITICAL RECEPTION.....	4
III. IMPRESSIONS OF THE PAST.....	9
Arcadia and Ancient Ruins.....	9
The Ruins of Dove Mill.....	14
The Swimming Hole.....	18
IV. SUBURBAN STATIONS.....	26
The Pennsylvania Railroad and the Bryn Mawr Tract.....	29
Suburban Fraternity.....	35
V. CONCLUSION.....	37
FIGURES.....	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	57

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. Swimming.....	39
2. Marey Wheel Photographs of Unidentified Model.....	40
3. A May Morning in the Park.....	41
4. Singing a Pathetic Song.....	42
5. Arcadia.....	43
6. An Arcadian.....	44
7. Dying Gaul.....	45
8. Map showing Schultz Mill.....	46
9. Dove Lake Mill.....	47
10. View of the Dove Mills.....	48
11. Study for Swimming.....	49
12. Study for Swimming.....	50
13. Study for Swimming.....	51
14. Motion Study: George Reynolds, Nude, Pole-Vaulting.....	52
15. The Champion Single Sculls.....	53
16. Bathers at Asnières.....	54
17. Bryn Mawr Hotel.....	55
18. Map showing Dove Lake and the Estate of Edward H. Coates.....	56

INTRODUCTION

Swimming (1884-85), I will argue, represents a landscape in transition. Set in the outskirts of Philadelphia, the painting evokes the tensions between the growing city and the disappearing countryside, capturing the latter as a place of memory and leisure. The work illuminates two competing ways that late nineteenth-century Americans understood the suburban landscape. On one hand, the swimming hole embodies the egalitarian and democratic leisure practices nostalgically associated with the old countryside. On the other hand, the site speaks to the suburban landscape as a retreat for wealthy urbanites seeking to escape the disease and disorder of the city. This thesis will use cultural representations such as guidebooks, advertisements, literature, and promotional material to examine the ways in which the area around the swimming hole was imagined locally, and thus were available for Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) to draw on in the creation of his work.

Swimming was Eakins' last outdoor scene set in the environs of Philadelphia. The painting shows a group of six nude men and a red Irish setter arranged around a massive stone pier. Each of the figures looks toward the water, apparently caught in a moment of quiet reverie. Their bodies appear crisp, rendered in bright detail against a vaguely defined background of dark green foliage. The angle of the sunlight on their bodies would seem to suggest that the scene takes place during the summertime around midday. Though the figures are turned away from the viewer, introspective in their contemplation of the water's surface, their facial features are rendered with precise detail. The clarity of

the figures has enabled them to be identified as students of the artist.¹ Talcott Williams reclines to the left as Benjamin Fox rises from the water. J. Laurie Wallace, seated, turns and reaches up to a standing Jesse Godley. George Reynolds dives into the water, his body caught in mid-air. Eakins portrayed himself as the sixth swimmer, submerged in the water to the far right.

Eakins' contemporaries noted the essential newness of his style of painting, commenting on ties to such explicitly modern pursuits as science and photography. Recent scholarship on *Swimming* has tended to focus on the figural group as representative of this newness. In his work on Victorian manhood, Martin Berger has used the group to discuss emerging homosocial communities in the Gilded Age.² In her work on the painting, Kathleen Foster discusses how the absence of figure painting in the American canon led period observers to consider it as modern.³ Marc Simpson uses the placement of the figures within the scene to discuss the narrative events of the painting.⁴ This thesis will seek to build on the work of these scholars by further situating the figural group in their historical moment and by examining the landscape setting of the painting in more detail.

The specific landscape, I will argue, is crucial to the painting's meaning, framing the figures within the anxieties of modern life. Nudes were common in images evoking

¹For more on how these attributions were made, see Sarah Cash, "Appendix: Biographies of Models for *Swimming*," in *Thomas Eakins and the Swimming Picture* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1996), 117-147.

²Martin Berger, *Man Made: Thomas Eakins and the Construction of Gilded Age Manhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 89-106.

³Kathleen Foster, "The Masking and Meaning of *Swimming*," in *Thomas Eakins and the Swimming Picture* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1996), 13-35.

⁴Marc Simpson, "Swimming Through Time: An Introduction," in *Thomas Eakins and the Swimming Picture* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1996), 1-12.

the classical past, yet *Swimming* presents those nudes in a recognizable, contemporary setting. It is this landscape that contemporary critics pointed to as anomalous, yet relatively little scholarly consideration has been given to the space in which the bathers stand. Sarah Cash broached the subject in her work for the Amon Carter Museum, where the painting is currently located.⁵ Cash discusses the circumstances surrounding Eakins' choice of the site, noting that the swimmers stand on a ruined mill foundation at Dove Lake to the west of the city. Building on her work, this thesis will consider the implications of this location. Dove Lake was located in Lower Merion near Bryn Mawr, an affluent suburb owned and promoted by the Pennsylvania Railroad. In depicting this site, *Swimming* engaged the complicated and conflicted cultural vision that emerged around this specific suburban landscape during this period. By reconstructing the ways that *Swimming* explores the cultural discourses that circulated around Dove Lake, this thesis aims to reposition Eakins as a perceptive interpreter of urban life. In doing so, this project begins to reconstruct the creative possibilities that late nineteenth-century American artists discovered in the richly complex terrain of the suburb.

⁵In 1996, the Amon Carter Museum put out a book on the painting with articles by Marc Simpson, Kathleen Foster, Doreen Bolger, Sarah Cash, Elizabeth Johns, Richard Brettell, and Claire Barry.

CHAPTER 1

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Swimming (Fig. 1) sits at the center of a series of personal and professional narratives for the artist, narratives that were linked to the larger social context. A controversial teacher, Eakins included himself along with his students in a scene intended for one of the most prominent board members at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. The painting was commissioned in the summer of 1884 by Edward Coates, chairman of the committee on instruction at the Pennsylvania Academy. The Pennsylvania Academy was the United States' oldest academy of fine arts, and the board was understandably conservative. Eakins had been promoted to director of instruction in 1882 and, under his leadership, the Academy had also become increasingly progressive. In the early 1880s, for example, at a time when only white male students had access to nude models, the Academy taught the study of nude figures to a diverse group of students including women and African Americans.⁶

Eakins also indulged in photographic experiments, using emerging technologies to allow for the greatest possible accuracy in artistic representation. The use of motion studies helped to contribute to the newness of *Swimming*. In 1884, the same year that *Swimming* was commissioned, the University of Pennsylvania built an outdoor studio for photographer Eadweard Muybridge. Edward Coates, the commissioner of *Swimming*,

⁶Amy Werbel, "Art, Pornography, Freak Shows, Medical Pictures, and the Guilty Pleasures of Photography in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia," in *Thomas Eakins: Art, Medicine, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 124.

and Thomas Eakins were the two members of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts selected to oversee the project. Eakins worked closely with Muybridge for several months in developing new techniques to capture locomotion on camera (Fig. 2).⁷ Eakins had used photographic studies in some of his earlier paintings, and had even used motion studies. Yet *Swimming* represents the first time that Eakins referenced photographic studies of human locomotion.

As he produced these photographic studies, Eakins wrestled with a vexing question: how is it possible to convey action in an image of arrested movement? Eakins had used Muybridge's motion studies of animals as inspiration in planning one earlier work. *A May Morning in the Park* (Fig. 3), also known as *The Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand*, took advantage of Muybridge's photographs of horses running. Critical reaction contended that the work was admirable as an experiment, but not as a finished work of art.⁸ It seems plausible that, five years later, Eakins was responding to such criticisms in his construction of *Swimming*. Rather than attempting a synthesis of forms between photographic and artistic modes of representation, Eakins instead created two distinct areas. The detailed figures in the foreground are rendered with anatomical precision, while the landscape appears as a vague impression.

In this distinct division, *Swimming* balances painterly and scientific methods of representation. Yet the painting was not well received. In its preview for the Academy's exhibition, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that Eakins' work would "excite abundant

⁷See Gordon Hendricks, *The Photographs of Thomas Eakins* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1975).

⁸For more on critical reaction to *A May Morning in the Park*, see Gordon Hendricks, "A May Morning in the Park," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 60, No. 285 (Spring 1965): 48-64.

criticism, both friendly and unfriendly.”⁹ Once the show opened, the *Philadelphia Times* came out with a decidedly negative review:

The picture contributed by Mr. Eakins, the master at the Academy, is not agreeable. It represents a group of men bathing and is evidently intended to show the results of instantaneous photography. The attitude of the diver is presumably correct, but it does not convey the impression of any possible motion and neither the flesh painting nor the general color of the picture is pleasing.¹⁰

Ironically, the diver is the only figure that Eakins did not use photography to model. Rather, he created wax sculptures of the diver so that he could better study the three-dimensionality of the form.¹¹ Repeating some of the earlier criticism of *A May Morning in the Park*, this reviewer critiques the lack of motion in the work. Here, though, the arrested action appears more deliberate, better enabling the painting to convey a heightened tension. The attitude of the diver invokes themes of transience and liminality, ideas which are further explored in the painting’s landscape elements.

In addition to their negative impression of arrested motion, critics interpreted the vaguely painted landscape as flawed. For example, Leslie Miller wrote in *American* that:

Mr. Eakins has done some very strange things, and while compelling admiration for his knowledge and skill in certain important respects, has kept his friend perpetually apologizing for him by the wildness of his errors in dealing with things of quite as much importance. In nothing that he has done however has his work been so persistently and inexcusably bad as in the landscapes which he has introduced as backgrounds for his figures. That in the “Swimming,” shown at the present exhibition, will serve as a fair illustration, and the extent of the mischief which such an example exerts is only to be judged by these reflections of it which

⁹“Academy Exhibition. Fifty-sixth Annual Display of Pictures and Other Works. An Unusually Varied and Interesting Collection, with Many Masterpieces of Contemporary American Artists, at Home and Abroad,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 29, 1885, 2.

¹⁰“At Private View: First Impressions of the Autumn Exhibition at the Academy of the Fine Arts,” *The Times (Philadelphia)*, October 29, 1885, 2.

¹¹Moussa M. Domit, *The Sculpture of Thomas Eakins* (Washington, D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969), 9.

disfigure the work of most of the older students.¹²

Here, Miller strongly reacts to the perceived disjunction between the figures and their setting. Though Miller attributes the indistinct character of the landscape to a lack of skill, it seems more likely, given the detail of the figures, that the loose quality of the brushwork was a conscious choice on the part of the artist. As I will argue in the following sections, the figures and the landscape are more intimately connected than they at first appear. Both engage themes of impermanence in the suburbs of Philadelphia, but do so in differing ways to convey a richly textured message.

Coates eventually rejected the piece, and instead accepted Eakins' more conventional *Pathetic Song* (Fig. 4). The acceptance of *Swimming* for placement in the academy would have constituted an act of legitimation for Eakins' provocative new style of painting. Patronage would have signaled to board members, students, and the general public that Coates supported Eakins' controversial study of the human body. Despite Coates' quiet refusal, his name was listed as the painting's owner in the academy's annual exhibition catalogue. After the painting was shown at the Pennsylvania Academy's fall exhibition in 1885, it was shown at the Southern Exposition in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1886, the piece was sent farther west to Chicago's Inter-State Industrial Exposition. In both exhibitions, *Swimming* garnered a resounding critical silence.

Swimming was to mark the end of an era for Eakins. The scandal over the use of nude models in his classes forced his resignation from the Academy in 1886. After that, Eakins kept *Swimming* at his home and did not paint nudes again until the turn of the century. During the ensuing decades, no one beyond the artist's immediate circle of

¹²Leslie W. Miller, "Art. The Awards of Prizes at the Academy," *American* 274 (November 7, 1885): 45.

family and friends saw the painting. No extant anecdotal or pictorial evidence survives to testify to the artist's connection with the work during these years. It is unclear where the work was hung within the house or if students came to study it. It would seem that the painting failed to register in any significant, public way during Eakins' lifetime.

The neglect continued until Eakins' death in 1916. In the New York and Philadelphia memorial exhibitions of 1917, the work was posthumously counted among Eakins' major achievements. Critical attention continued to mount through the century. Today, *Swimming* is considered one of the canonical works of American art, commended for its ability to balance reality and idealism. Early responses, however, regarded the work as a kind of unfiltered document. For example, a 1921 review in *The Arts* described that painting as "an invaluable statement of historical fact. So men looked and so men acted in these our United States during the lifetime of Thomas Eakins."¹³ Less than four decades after the work's creation, *Swimming* had entered into the realm of documentary history. Though this notion of factual presentation lacks nuance, *Swimming* can be viewed as a lens through which to understand the changing urban landscape of Philadelphia in the 1880s. This lens does not present an unfiltered view, as the early review would suggest, but rather a meticulously constructed vision. Eakins worked with great diligence to balance signifiers of the changing landscape, using the nostalgic fantasies associated with the countryside to speak to the realities of his historical moment.

¹³Hamilton Easter Field, *The Arts* 1 (February – March 1921): 45.

CHAPTER 2

IMPRESSIONS OF THE PAST

Historical narratives contained within *Swimming* are integral to the work's modernity. Modernity, at the most basic level, is premised on the notion that the present is radically different than the past.¹⁴ *Swimming* presents multiple signifiers of the past, underscoring the rapidity of the changes occurring in Philadelphia's outer city in the 1880s. The ruined foundation of a pre-Revolutionary mill points to the pace of development in the nation's first hundred years. Nude figures and classical poses reference an even more remote past, underscoring the relative youth of the United States. Further, the subject of the painting references an outmoded form of leisure associated with an earlier, bucolic moment.

Arcadia and Ancient Ruins

Swimming evokes nostalgia for a simpler rural past, characterized by the ruined mill foundation on which the bathers stand. Yet the ruins also situate the work within a different kind of time, one that evokes a distant past. Eakins painted *Swimming* after a series of Arcadian compositions completed from 1879 to 1885. In these paintings, sculptures, and photographs, Eakins provided a modern view of an ancient world.¹⁵ Men and women, nude and costumed, inhabit an idealized landscape that evokes classical

¹⁴See Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

¹⁵For more on this series, see Marc Simpson, "Thomas Eakins and His Arcadian Works," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, 1.2 (Autumn 1987): 71-95.

antiquity. It is possible that Coates and his wife, both of whom had an interest in antiquity, anticipated a painting such as *Arcadia* or *An Arcadian* (Figs. 5 & 6) when they commissioned a work from Eakins.¹⁶ Their dissatisfaction with *Swimming* may have resulted in part from the understanding that, in classical works, nudes were ennobled through suggestions of another time and place. The temporal and geographical distance of the figures allowed them to be effectively clothed in allusion. *Swimming* depicts nudes in a landscape, but locates those nudes in the present day, thereby denying distance.

Though unusual within Eakins' larger body of work, such classical scenes were hardly unprecedented. Eakins was, after all, educated in the most rigorous art academies of the United States and France. Antiquity provided the core of instruction and established the criteria by which modern works were evaluated. At the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Eakins chose to study with Jean-Léon Gérôme, the leading *néo-grec* artist of the preceding generation. Moreover, Eakins was working on his Arcadian series at the same time as artists such as Adolphe William Bouguereau, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, James McNeil Whistler, and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes were at work on their images of antique peace and tranquility. Eakins' choice of an idyllic, pastoral subject could also be related to the nearly contemporary work of American artists such as Thomas Dewing and George Inness, whose landscapes were often characterized by a pervasive, understated melancholy.¹⁷

¹⁶For more on Coates' interest in antiquity, see Doreen Bolger, "'Kindly Relations': Edward Hornor Coates and *Swimming*," in *Thomas Eakins and the Swimming Picture* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1996), 36-48.

¹⁷Marc Simpson, "Thomas Eakins and His Arcadian Works," 72.

Perhaps the contemplative mood of Eakins' Arcadian works functions as an artistic gesture of mourning. Eakins began to create his classical pieces shortly after the death of his sister Margaret from typhoid fever in 1882. Margaret had often accompanied her brother on outdoor excursions, and it seems fitting that Eakins would choose idyllic landscapes as a means by which to mourn and commemorate her.¹⁸

The idea of Arcadia would have both invoked a pastoral ideal and conjured up a memento mori. Since Nicholas Poussin's painting of *The Arcadian Shepherds* (1637-38), the concept of Arcadia in art has been associated with the phrase "Et in Arcadia ego." The words, spoken by a personified death, could be translated as "And in Arcadia I" or "Even in Arcadia I exist." Death here does not necessarily correspond to mortality, but rather the contemplation of an implacable future. Death is also associated with meditation on an idyllic past.¹⁹ The same year that *Swimming* was commissioned, a poem entitled "In Arcadia" was published in *Century Illustrated Magazine* describing Arcadia as representative of a "dead past."²⁰ It is this understanding of Arcadia, I would suggest, that most directly applies to the longing for past forms in Eakins' paintings.

In nostalgically invoking pre-Revolutionary forms, *Swimming* draws on the character of such classical landscapes. Its figures are arranged in a triangular composition in a shallow, relief-like space reminiscent of a pediment or a Greek procession. The idea of a procession would seem to imply motion toward some point, yet

¹⁸For more on Margaret and the Arcadia paintings, see Alan C. Braddock, "Bodies of Water: Thomas Eakins, Racial Ecology, and the Limits of Civic Realism," in *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, ed. Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 145-46.

¹⁹See E. Panofsky, "'Et in Arcadia Ego': Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," reprinted in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 257-262.

²⁰R. T. W. Duke, "In Arcadia," *Century Illustrated Magazine*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1 (November 1884): 157.

motion in *Swimming* appears cyclical, its content unresolved. The figures are shown at regular intervals, caught between movement and stillness. The narrow stage also works to convey stillness and isolation. The figures turn away from the viewer, creating a psychic distance.²¹

The psychic distance not only separates the figures from the viewer, but also separates the figures from each other. The heavy, enfolding landscape of the background envelops them, preventing their ability to connect with their companions. The figures contemplate the water, their gaze turned on a space characterized by absence. However, the unresolved action of the diver signals that the empty space contains something yet to be realized. In not reaching the moment yet to come, the work both projects forward and backward in time. Drawing on the themes of Arcadian landscapes, *Swimming* simultaneously invites both meditation on the moment that is passing and anticipation of the moment soon to come.

Eakins took several outdoor photographs in preparation for *Swimming*, yet abstracted the forms of these photographs to better convey a pastoral ideal. The poses of the figures in the extant studies appear altered in the final composition to better invoke classical sculpture. For example, the figure on the far left is altered to mimic *The Dying Gaul* (Fig. 7), a reproduction of which Eakins would have had access to at the Academy. Similarly, the viewpoints, framing, and composition of the landscape in those photographs—taken from three different spots—are altered in the final composition of the painting. Fewer figures are included in the final canvas, and the timbered form that

²¹Marc Simpson, “Thomas Eakins and His Arcadian Works,” 87.

appears at the end of the stone foundation is removed.²² The timbered form does not appear in the oil sketches for the work either, though these sketches were likely completed on a different day.²³ Combinations of figures and settings, observed in separate locations, would seem to suggest a synthetic process in the creation of the final composition. Eakins' use of photographic studies in the creation of his canvas indicates a consideration of the comparative positions of painting and photography, emblematic of traditional and modern modes of representation in the history of visual media. Further, a similar handling of photographic studies in the construction of the two Arcadian paintings may suggest that Eakins conceived of them as related projects. One model, J. Laurie Wallace, appears both in *Swimming* and in *Arcadia*.²⁴

While the figures in the scene correspond more closely to preparatory photographic studies, the landscape allows for a broader interpretation. *Swimming* uses the same elements as those in Eakins' Arcadian compositions, but locates those elements in a site specific to Philadelphia's rapidly changing suburbs. The inclusion of classical nudes underscores the speed of development in the outer city. Nudes would normally be associated with Greek or Roman ruins, showing the rise and fall of distant civilizations over thousands of years. Here, the nudes are situated on the foundation of a pre-Revolutionary mill building. This ruin points to the rise, fall, and decay of rural industry in the nation's first hundred years. The use of classical subjects and ruined landscapes to

²²Foster, "The Making and Meaning of *Swimming*," 21.

²³The setter dog, Harry, appears in two oil sketches but in none of the photographs. This divergence may hint at lost or destroyed photographs, or may suggest that the photographs were taken before Eakins' vision of the final work had crystallized.

²⁴Simpson, "His Arcadian Works," 78.

signify the passing of time had been a trope in American culture for some time.²⁵ The classical poses of the figures provide a point of comparison for modern life, underscoring the alarming rapidity of ruination in Philadelphia's outer city.

The Ruins of Dove Mill

The motif of ruins grew in popularity toward the close of the nineteenth-century in the United States.²⁶ In large part, this was because ruins helped to convey the pace, scale, and intensity of American urbanization. They also commemorated the nation's founding moment, acting as sites of memorialization to a bygone era. As with the swimming hole, this memorialization contained an element of mystery in its historical associations. Real and imagined glories are written onto ruins, objects which testify to the progress of an empire. The ruined mill foundation on which Eakins' bathers stand invites meditation on decay and progress in Philadelphia's outer city. Though it is not clear whether the Eakins' figures stand on the foundation of the original Dove Mill—for which Dove Lake is named—this ruin would have been understood by period viewers as associated with the nation's founding moment.²⁷

Dove Lake, the body of water depicted in this painting, was situated along Mill Creek, a tributary that emptied into the Schuylkill River, one of the Philadelphia's main arteries. Aptly named, Mill Creek was noted for its many pre-Revolutionary mill sites. Dove Mill, built in the early eighteenth century, first appears on the 1750 Scull and Heap

²⁵This trope had been recognized at least since Thomas Cole painted his five part series *The Course of Empire* (1833-36). See Angela Miller, *Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

²⁶From more on the popularization of ruins in nineteenth-century American culture, see Nick Yablon, *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819-1919* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

²⁷Postcards tend to favor the extant building on the opposite side of the lake, though literature refers to both structures as having pre-Revolutionary associations.

Plan of the City and Environs of Philadelphia as “Schultz Mill” (Fig. 8). The mill likely belonged to the Schütz family, Protestant papermakers from Crefeld, Germany, who settled in the Germantown area in 1733. The family name eventually became anglicized to Scheetz. In 1748, Conrad Scheetz purchased one hundred acres of land from Donald Davis. This land included an existing fulling mill, used for processing woven or knitted wool into a tight fabric. Scheetz then converted the fulling mill into a paper mill, known as Upper Mill. Accounts show that Benjamin Franklin bought many types of paper for his press from this mill, including some bearing watermarks with his initials.²⁸ The mill produced paper for the Continental currency, at one time under Franklin’s supervision, and government documents for the capital in Philadelphia, including a reprinting of the Declaration of Independence in 1817.²⁹ The association of the site with Franklin, one of Philadelphia’s foremost figures, added to its later allure.

In 1798, the Scheetz Upper Mill was sold to Thomas Amies from Switzerland. The deed for the purchase of the mill identifies Amies as a cordwainer or shoemaker from Philadelphia.³⁰ Amies also had a background in making paper. Perhaps he had learned the trade in his homeland; the Swiss were regarded as some of the highest quality paper producers in Europe. Amies also had a tenure at the Wilcox Ivy Mill in Chester. Amies’ watermark may have derived from that mill and was intended to exemplify that

²⁸The Lower Merion Historical Society, *The First 300: The Amazing and Rich History of Lower Merion* (Collingdale, PA: Diane Publishing Co., 2000), 59.

²⁹“Franklin Had Scheme Aimed at Bogus Bills,” *Main Line Times* (Ardmore, PA), October 18, 1979.

³⁰The Lower Merion Historical Society, *The First 300*, 59.

the paper could not be counterfeited.³¹ The symbol, a dove with an olive branch in its beak, became the site's namesake.

Importation and the industrialization of the papermaking process gradually put Mill Creek's handmade papermakers out of business. Amies twice declared bankruptcy before his death in 1849. In 1873, the site's new owner, Samuel Croft, dammed Mill Creek for the use of his nearby copper-rolling mill. The meadow surrounding Dove Mill was flooded, artificially creating Dove Lake. In meeting his factory's industrial requirements, Croft simultaneously tapped the region's recreational potential for swimming, boating, and skating.

Samuel Croft's son-in law, I. Layton Register, acquired the property from his father-in-law in 1882 or 1883 and would have owned the land during the years that Eakins worked on *Swimming*.³² Register was interested in the preservation of then-ruined Dove Mill and its surrounding buildings. Register was also an amateur photographer who enjoyed "making photographs of picturesque or other interesting subjects."³³ Indeed, he was not the only artist to take an interest in the ruins around Dove Lake. Amateur photographers such as John Coates Browne (1838-1918) recorded bucolic views along Mill Creek. Browne's 1878 view of a fishing outing on Dove Lake (Fig. 9) shows the remains of a mill foundation, identifiable by its shaft and gear wheel, in the foreground.

³¹The Lower Merion Historical Society, *The First 300*, 57.

³²The Lower Merion Historical Society, *The First 300*, 264.

³³"Ye Old Grist Mill," *Ardmore Chronicle*, July 13, 1907 and "I. Layton Register Dies Suddenly," *Ardmore Chronicle*, October 4, 1913.

It is unclear how Eakins first became aware of Dove Lake and its rich historical associations. Eakins' ties with the Photographic Society of Philadelphia, of which Brown was a founding member, may have provided an avenue to view photographs of the area. William E. Winner (c. 1815-1883), who had been commissioned by Samuel Croft to paint the site in 1872 (Fig. 10), was actively exhibiting at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts annuals in the late 1870s and early 1880s.³⁴ It is also possible that Edward Coates knew about the fashionable area and the nearby lake through his social connections, and may have suggested the site to Eakins. The area was growing in popularity as a weekend retreat for the city's elite, a topic that I elaborate on in the following chapter. One guide notes that, "The mouth of Mill Creek is also an interesting place for visitors...for a quarter of a mile to the paper mill is a good, level road, beautifully shaded, which with the surrounding scenery, makes a very attractive walk."³⁵ Dove Lake would only have been a short walk from Bryn Mawr station, a stop on the Main Line of the Pennsylvania Railroad .

By the time that Eakins and his students visited Dove Lake in the summer of 1884, the site's industrial past had become even more obscured. The ruined foundation, seen in the foreground of the preparatory photographs of *Swimming*, had further deteriorated (Figs. 11-13). The shaft and gear wheel that the stone structure had supported in 1878 had been dismantled. Eakins' final painting works to exaggerate the decay, cropping out the extant industrial building on the opposite shore in favor of the

³⁴Cash, "Friendly and Unfriendly," 50.

³⁵Theodore W. Bean, ed., *The History of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Everts and Peck, 1889), 227.

ruined mill foundation. The focus on a ruined foundation points to a founding moment in Philadelphia's—and the nation's—history.

The Swimming Hole

The painting was exhibited by the artist during his lifetime first as *Swimmers* and then as *The Swimmers*. The title was altered by Eakins' widow, Susan Macdowell, to *The Swimming Hole* for the painter's memorial exhibition in New York in 1917. Four years later, the title was finally changed to *The Old Swimming Hole*. The work is currently displayed at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, under the title *Swimming*. Recent scholarship has tended to regard the place—the swimming hole—as a site of nostalgia, and the changes to the title in the early twentieth century as reinforcing this interpretation. Yet the action—swimming—was also tied to nostalgic longing for past forms.³⁶ In its multiple invocations of the past, *Swimming* encourages us to consider ways that nostalgia for an earlier bucolic moment created a fabricated image of the countryside within the late nineteenth-century cultural imagination.

In Philadelphia, the character of swimming was beginning to change. The increasing popularity of bathing suits and swimming pools were making nude, outdoor swimming a thing of the past. Philadelphia opened one of the earliest municipal pools in America on June 21, 1884, the same year that *Swimming* was commissioned, at the intersection of Twelfth and Wharton Streets. The “swimming bath,” as it was commonly called, was so popular that young men regularly waited an hour in line to enter. On the evening of June 24, a small riot ensued when expectant swimmers were informed that

³⁶ I say this to complicate Martin Berger's interpretation of the title's change, in which only the image of the swimming hole is described as having nostalgic associations. Berger, “Modernity and Gender,” 34.

they would not be admitted because the pool was already filled to capacity.³⁷ Given this shift, Eakins' depiction of a swimming hole would have been read by period viewers as referencing a past era.

The swimming hole acts as a signifier of longing for a past moment. By their nature, swimming holes invite annual return to the same site, allowing visitors to note changes in the landscape over several years. Popular literature of the period often associated swimming with nostalgic reflection. For example, the concluding lines of James Whitcomb's Riley's wildly popular poem "The Old Swimmin'-Hole" (1883) drew on the sentimental notion of return:

Oh! The old swimmin'-hole! When I last saw
The scenes was all changed, like the change in my face;
The bridge of the railroad now crosses the spot
Where the old divin'-log lays sunk and fergot.
And I stray down the banks where the trees ust to be—
But never again will they shade shelter me!
And I wish in my sorrow I could strip to the soul,
And dive off in my grave like the old swimmin'-hole.³⁸

The narrator in the poem describes a visit to the site of his old swimming hole. Like the scene in Eakins' painting, the swimming hole in this poem is situated in a changing landscape. Riley points to the railroad as central to this transformation. Though not pictured in *Swimming*, the railroad was essential to the development of the suburban community around Dove Lake and was likely a factor Eakins' selection of the site. The importance of the railroad in the surrounding area will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter. However, before considering the moment in which the painting was

³⁷Jesse Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 8.

³⁸James Whitcomb Riley, "The Old Swimmin'-Hole," in *The Complete Poetical Works of James Whitcomb Riley* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 246.

created, it is first necessary to explore how the area's past would have been understood. This understanding, whether real or imagined, provided the standard against which developments in Eakins' own time would have been measured.

In Riley's poem, the swimming hole provides a frame for understanding the past that situates change within the memory of an individual. The narrator, now approaching death, uses the swimming hole to reflect on the changes that occurred during his lifetime. He notes that changes in the scene were like the changes in his face, observing the correspondence between his aging body and the transformed landscape. Since their sentimental significance derives from their position as a cherished site of youthful activity, swimming holes tend to correspond to individuals. The amber ripples across the water allow for quiet reverie as the narrator of Riley's poem contemplates his mortality. Death is invoked in the last line of the poem, as the narrator expresses a desire to "dive off in [his] grave like the old swimmin'-hole." The narrator wants his death to seem as if he is diving into the swimming hole, underscoring his longing to return to an earlier state. Further, in likening the swimming hole to a grave, Riley positions the swimming hole as a comparable site of commemoration. The swimming hole serves to memorialize the idyllic landscape, now dead and gone, that the narrator remembers from his youth.

However, the past that is invoked through the swimming hole is neither clear nor fixed because it exists within the memory of an individual. Experiences are not directly remembered, and can be understood differently over time. Shifting memories of the swimming hole alter the meaning of the site, re-imagining its past as idyllic. A second poem by Riley entitled "In Swimming-time" appeared the same year in *Century Illustrated Magazine* and alludes to the malleability of memory. The poem closes:

Over which the spring-board spurns
Each again as he returns.
Ah! The glorious carnival!
Purple lips and chattering teeth—
Eyes that burn—but, in beneath,
Every care beyond recall.
Every task forgotten quite—
And again, in dreams at night,
Dropping, drifting through it all!³⁹

This illusory place is framed within a cycle of forgetting. Forgetting underscores the connection of the swimming hole to escapist leisure, away from the cares of city life. Forgetting also invokes the transience of the experience. Figures forget their bodily concerns as they jump into the icy water, and revisit the experience of drifting without recollection in their dreams at night. In his first poem, Riley had posited the swimming hole as a site of return, a place that individuals came back to year after year, allowing them to mark the changes in their lives. Here, Riley posits the act of swimming as a process of return. The repeated motion of figures jumping in and climbing out of the water necessitates re-experience of the action.

The kinds of transient experiences described in Riley's poems can help to inform the ways in which the past landscape is memorialized in Eakins' painting. *Swimming* is characterized by a lack of clarity or fixity. The ruined foundation indicates that the scene is located along Mill Creek, to the northwest of the city; however, the landscape in which that ruin is situated remains indistinct. The foliage on the left obscures topographical markers, and the brushwork on the right appears loose in its disregard of detail. The road that the swimmers used to access the site, along with the nearby residential houses, is either camouflaged or cropped out of this picture.

³⁹James Whitcomb Riley, "In Swimming-time," *Century Illustrated Magazine* Vol. XXVI, No. 5 (September 1883): 798.

Further, the water, encompassing nearly half of the picture, acts as an obstacle to vision. The canvas is divided diagonally between land and water, creating a visual equivalency between the two. This symmetry is echoed in the figural composition. Three figures appear in the water—excluding the dog—and three appear anchored on the stone foundation. The way in which Eakins painted the surface of the water echoes the loose brush strokes that he used to paint the landscape, resisting mirror-like clarity. Rather than allowing us to see what goes on under the surface of the water, the distortions on the surface mirror the surrounding landscape. The land is reflected in such a way that, on the right side of the canvas, it is difficult to discern the point at which the water meets the shore.

The standing figure in Eakins' painting is reminiscent of the narrator in Riley's poem "The Old Swimmin'-Hole." He looks down into the water, perhaps reflecting on the changes in his own life. Within the context of the painting, however, his posture also signals a way of viewing the landscape. In looking at the surface of the water, he gazes on a distorted reflection of the surrounding landscape—a landscape that appears artificially ideal in its exclusion of signs of suburban development. This mode of vision mirrors the kind of remembrance described in Riley's poems. In "In Swimming-time," Riley described the shimmering surface of the water as, "Faint and vague and indistinct / As the like reflected thing."⁴⁰ It is not only the surface of the water that appears indistinct, but also the landscape that it reflects. Signs of modernity are absent from *Swimming*, creating the impression of a pastoral haven. This false impression is offered as a past iteration of the site. This bucolic ideal, whether it existed or not, is met with nostalgic longing in the present moment.

⁴⁰Riley, "In Swimming-time."

Other figures in the scene signal ways of looking at the landscape. The diver, for example, is poised mid-air. The figure posits a future moment in which his action would be realized. Yet in this future moment, the figure would be completely obscured by the brown, shimmering waters. His position between states signals larger processes within the space of the canvas. Caught in moment of transition, the diver foregrounds the theme of dynamic liminality and encourages us to read the landscape around him in these terms. The future moment—and by extension the full realization of suburban development—remains elusive, though the processes for transformation of the outer city were well underway. *Swimming* captures a moment of uncertainty, using the irresolution of the diver's action to gesture to broader anxieties about modern life.

Eakins also includes himself in the scene, swimming towards the other figures at the bottom right of the canvas. His presence speaks to the role of the artist as an interpreter of his cultural moment. Eakins positions himself physically closer to the viewer, gesturing towards the cluster of activity around the stone foundation. Separate from the other figures, he appears to look back on the scene as if looking at a snapshot of a moment from the past. Indeed, photography influenced Eakins' construction of this canvas. The way in which the figures are grouped around the stone foundation is visually similar to the photographic motion studies that Eakins was producing with Muybridge, some of which included the same models that were used in *Swimming* (Fig. 14).⁴¹ Even with the subtle differences in physiognomy, it is easy to imagine that the figures grouped around the stone foundation are in reality a single figure pictured in sequential stages of the same movement. Though new photographic techniques would have allowed the artist

⁴¹ Hendricks, *The Photographs of Thomas Eakins*, 6-9.

to accurately capture the human form in moments otherwise too fleeting to be registered by the eye, Eakins chose not to use such technology in the creation of the canvas.

These, and other choices that Eakins made as an artist, can be understood by looking at the way that he positioned his own body. Visually he is closest to the viewer, acting as a surrogate through which to view the scene. Mediating our vision, he is the closest to the present moment—the time that exists outside of the space of the canvas. From this position, he looks back at a disappearing way of life, anchored firmly on the foundations of the past. Yet Eakins chose to portray this disappearing experience in a form evocative of the most cutting-edge technology. The painting thus posits, simultaneously, that the figures clustered around the pier represent a modern form of production, and that Eakins, the lone figure submerged in the water, is emblematic of a disappearing practice. The figures associated with photography are elevated in the picture, and their bodies appear more wholly articulated. Eakins' body, on the other hand, remains largely obscured under the surface of the water. Eakins own middle-aged figure is distanced from the youthful, classicized physiques of his students. Visually, *Swimming* reconciles the artistic traditions of idealism and naturalism, engaging the precarious tension between painting and photography.⁴²

Despite the canvas's title, Eakins is the only figure engaged in the act of swimming. In addition to his position away from this group, this activity could associate the painter with a disappearing skill set. By the time Eakins painted *Swimming*, swimming was itself considered “a lost art.” An 1880 article from *The Philadelphia Inquirer* notes, “While our boys can row like thoroughbred water-men...a very small

⁴²For more on this tension see Werbel, *Art, Medicine, and Sexuality*.

minority of them know how to swim. This is fully proved by the number of deaths by drowning and of hairbreadth which are calling for record.”⁴³ Swimming schools, like Mr. Payne’s Natatorium on Broad Street, sprung up to provide instruction. An 1882 article entitled “The Art of Swimming” lists some of the reasons for getting trained: “A misstep from a river bank, the treacherous turn of a plank, the sudden capsizing of a pleasure boat...all these are often followed by fatal results.”⁴⁴ Though painting was by no means a lost art, its association with swimming in Eakins’ self-representation engages the art community’s anxieties over the advent of mechanized reproduction.

Swimming envisions a tension between technology and tradition. In doing so, it engages broader processes re-shaping the landscape around Dove Lake. With the advent of the railroad, elite residential suburbs quickly replaced the outer city’s farms and rural industries. Developers sought to erase signs of labor, imposing building regulations to ensure that the new communities could offer the kind of idyllic pastoralism that urbanites expected of the countryside. In invoking the ways that Mill Creek was imagined locally, *Swimming* echoed the transformation of the actual landscape to fit cultural representations.

⁴³“Baths and Bathing Places,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* Vol. CIII (July 9, 1880): 2.

⁴⁴“The Art of Swimming: How to Acquire Proficiency and Skill in the Exercise,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* Vol. CVII (August 11, 1882): 2.

CHAPTER 3

SUBURBAN STATIONS: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF THE OUTER CITY

Great cities grow westward. The tendency of populations in the centres of civilization is to follow the sun...Philadelphia exemplifies this westward growth of improvement and population to a degree that cannot fail to impress the observer of its progress.⁴⁵

- *Suburban Stations and Rural Homes of the Pennsylvania Railroad*, 1874

The idea that the course of empire moves westward was not new to the United States.⁴⁶ However, within the context of Philadelphia, the move westward was tied more to flight than progress. During the 1880s, the city's elite formed low density residential communities to the west of the city. Overcrowding and dismal living conditions in the center of the city prompted the need to move outward. Reformers viewed congestion and the lack of family privacy as two major sources of urban ills; they concluded that an essential step in curing the disease of urban America was to persuade those with the means to do so to move out of the center city. This plea for decentralization was also related to fears of social unrest. Many believed that unless the urban working class could realistically aspire to home ownership, and thereby acquire a stake in American society, the city would soon turn to revolution. Suburbanization was seen as a way to allow the majority of city dwellers to achieve home ownership, and allowed the city's elite to

⁴⁵*Suburban Stations and Rural Homes on the Pennsylvania Railroad* (Philadelphia: Office of the General Passenger Agent, 1874), 3.

⁴⁶ For more on the course of empire, see Angela Miller, *Empire of the Eye*.

escape the crowding. Residential communities developed to the north and west of the city, upstream from the majority of the city's factories.⁴⁷

Residential decentralization was also closely linked to racial tensions in the city, and could perhaps best be described as an early manifestation of "white flight." Though widespread racial segregation was still some years in the future for the outer city, its groundwork was laid during this period. The influx of European peasantry both altered the composition of the city's population and increased urban congestion. During this period, the overwhelming majority of the city's elite lived in neighborhoods along Chestnut, Walnut, Spruce, and Pine streets. Immediately to the south of the upper-class residential district was the densest concentration of the city's black population. Luxury townhouses fronted the main thoroughfares while cramped row houses jammed the back alleys and side streets. Businesses and commercial enterprises competed with homes for space. While the urban sector was densely settled and diverse both in terms of population and function, the city's suburbs offered spacious residential plots away from the main thoroughfare.⁴⁸

Between the 1860s and the 1880s, Philadelphia newspapers, magazines, and public health reports became increasingly concerned with the effects of rapid population growth on water purity and sanitary conditions in the city. In the 1870s, the Schuylkill River was so badly polluted from untreated industrial sewage and domestic cesspool waste that disease in the city reached scandalous proportions. By 1875, Philadelphia's Commission of Engineers reported that the Schuylkill River had become a natural

⁴⁷Margaret Marsh, "Suburbanization and the Search for Community: Residential Decentralization in Philadelphia, 1880-1900," *Pennsylvania History* Vol. 44 No. 2 (April 1977): 101.

⁴⁸Marsh, "Residential Decentralization," p. 100, 102-103.

“sewer.”⁴⁹ The city continued to be plagued with reoccurring epidemics of typhoid, a disease caused by drinking water tainted with human waste. Hundreds of residents died each year from waterborne diseases. According to annual reports by the city’s Board of Health, the death toll from typhoid was 4,357 during the 1860s. That figure rose to 4,417 for the 1870s and to 6,394 in the 1880s. Bureaucratic inaction by the city’s Republican Party machine only compounded the problem, compromising the city’s progressive image. Philadelphia became infamous for its pervasive pollution and political corruption.⁵⁰

Dove Lake, a suburban retreat well outside of downtown Philadelphia, would have remained relatively untainted. Though the lake had been used by a nearby copper-rolling mill, water would have flowed downstream from there along Mill Creek, carrying any industrial pollution to the already contaminated waters of the Schuylkill River. The elevation of Dove Lake thus ensured a greater measure of clean air and pure water. One guide to the area notes that “scarcely a large farm can be found which does not contain one or more excellent springs of living water.”⁵¹ *Swimming* draws attention to these features, as water is an integral part of the landscape and central to the activity of the painting. Swimmers, by necessity, need clean water to enjoy their recreation. In

⁴⁹Alan C. Braddock, “Bodies of Water: Thomas Eakins, Racial Ecology, and the Limits of Civic Realism,” in *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 133.

⁵⁰See Braddock, “Bodies of Water.” Also see Sam Alewitz, *“Filthy Dirty”: A Social History of Unsanitary Philadelphia in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Garland, 1989). On typhoid deaths see Michael P. McCarthy, *Typhoid and the Politics of Public Health in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1989), 7.

⁵¹Bean, *History of Montgomery County*, 224.

recalling distant and recent pasts, Eakins also posits the outer city as a space that has yet to be contaminated by urban ills.

The Pennsylvania Railroad and the Bryn Mawr Tract

While the urban sector of Philadelphia was condensed into an area of sixteen square miles, the outer city offered 113 square miles for potential development. In part, advances in transportation allowed for the outward thrust of the population into this area. By the 1880s, the rail lines were used to escape the city's teeming population and find "the solitude of nature."⁵² Passenger service along the Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line increased rapidly in the late-nineteenth century from six locals in 1869 to fifteen in 1874. Though service was increasing, relatively high fares limited access to Philadelphia's more prosperous residents. In the period leading up to the production of *Swimming*, the suburbs to the west of the city were largely occupied by elite urbanites. The site that Eakins' selected for his painting, a lake near the Bryn Mawr train station, was located in the city's most affluent suburb. The wealthiest and most powerful families in Philadelphia either owned homes in the area, to be used as weekend retreats, or reserved space in the luxurious Bryn Mawr Hotel.

Though not pictured in *Swimming*, the railroad was instrumental in shaping the character of the landscape around Dove Lake. Railroads appear in other works by Eakins, often in scenes where recreational activities are juxtaposed against a background emblematic of production and commerce. For example, in *The Champion Single Sculls* (1871), figures row brightly colored boats below a railroad bridge with factories visible in the distance (Fig. 15). Much scholarly attention has been given to similar European

⁵²*Smith's Handbook and Guide in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: George Delp & Co., 1870), 158.

scenes, particularly in the environs of Paris.⁵³ Formerly a site of aristocratic retreat, the outer areas of the city became accessible to a variety of classes with the advent of the railroad. For example, Georges Seurat's *Bathers at Asnières* (1884), which was painted in the same year as *Swimming*, shows a group of working-class men enjoying the waters in the industrial suburb of Clichy (Fig. 16). Their leisure is contrasted against the railroad and industrial smokestacks in the background. Eakins had studied in Paris, and would have been familiar with the ways in which Impressionists, and other period painters, engaged the subject of suburban leisure. Like *Bathers at Asnières*, *Swimming* engages themes of riparian recreation away from, yet intimately connected with, urban life.

Though *Swimming* resonates with these forms, it represents a different aspect of development in the outer city. The site for Eakins' painting was accessible by the train, yet it no longer included active industrial production. As late as 1880, Mill Creek had been a sparsely populated area inhabited by farmers and manual laborers, including a number of immigrants and African Americans. Though the area around the swimming hole had been a working class industrial settlement similar to Clichy, by the time that Eakins' painted *Swimming* the area was being transformed into an upper class residential community. Instead of coexisting with other elements of economic life, escapist recreation remade the landscape, shaping it to better fit a pastoral ideal.

Bryn Mawr differed from the city's other suburbs in that it was owned, developed, and aggressively promoted by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. Promotional materials offered a retreat free from the city's pollutants, characterizing the

⁵³ For the most complete work on the subject, see T.J. Clark, "The Environs of Paris," in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 147-204.

landscape as pure, verdant, and picturesque. The Pennsylvania Railroad's 1874 guide to Suburban Stations and Rural Homes, used these ideas to emphasize the attractiveness of the region:

This rolling vista is alternated with fields and forests, the variety adding greatly to the charm. To the north and east the undulations are carved into beautiful outlines by the streams flowing to the Schuylkill, and their courses can be plainly traced by the wooded growth along their banks. Added to this elevated position, with its beautiful perspectives, are the advantages of an abundance of pure water, a soil extremely fertile, and an atmosphere free from all deleterious exaltations.⁵⁴

The abundance of pure water in a scenic landscape promotes the area as a place for healthful leisure. Later the guide describes Mill Creek in a similar way, noting that it “is a wonderfully wild and picturesque stream.”⁵⁵ This “vitalizing artery” is characterized by rugged scenery, suggesting a kind of natural vigor. This perceived wildness increasingly diverged from the reality of the space as development progressed, yet the emphasis on natural living remained one of the area's chief draws.

Swimming resonates with the image of the area put forward by promotional literature. The painting depicts a secluded retreat sheltered by dense, dark foliage. Away from the cares of urban life, the figures indulge in the untainted waters, immersed in their relaxed, rejuvenating exercise. The warm green foliage and cool blue waters invite repose, while the lack of external referents allow the figures to linger in a space of temporal and spatial dislocation. The continuation of the landscape into the distance, fluidly blending the edge of the lake with an open field, suggests a continuation across both space and time. The swimmers here repeat an activity emblematic of a bygone era, implying that the area around them has similarly resisted change. The landscape here

⁵⁴Suburban Stations, 21.

⁵⁵Suburban Stations, 28.

gratifies the desires of urban visitors, offering them a pastoral refuge not yet touched by the expanding metropolitan center. Picturing a redemptive retreat, *Swimming* embodies the fantasy of the area. The romanticized mystery of the ruined foundation and the nostalgically cherished form of the swimming hole offer a return to the lyricism of an earlier time. However, this imagined vision did not correspond to the realities of the area. Dove Lake was not a natural feature of Mill Creek, but rather a vestige of rural industry. In Eakins' painting, the extant structures of such manufactories are cropped out of the scene, reflecting the way that the area's recent past was elided in cultural memory.

The Pennsylvania Railroad Company was instrumental in shaping the landscape to fit the idyllic image that it was promoting. In attempting to regulate the quality of the development of the Bryn Mawr Tract, the Real Estate Department incorporated a number of building restrictions into the deeds of the individual buildings lots, establishing what can now be viewed as zoning restrictions. These restrictions were the first of their kind in the area and were designed "to preserve unimpaired the natural beauties of the site, and permit their enhancement by progressive improvement."⁵⁶ Part of this enhancement enforced the prohibition of "manufactories, or other buildings of offensive occupation."⁵⁷ In erasing extant forms of rural industry, the railroad created spacious suburban plots that physically manifested the ways in which the countryside was perceived. Eakins drew on this imagined openness in his construction of *Swimming*. The open field and sky in the background suggest an expansive, uncluttered landscape that extends beyond the frame of

⁵⁶Suburban Stations, 23.

⁵⁷Suburban Stations, 25.

the canvas. The possibility of an expansive, lush landscape became an irresistible allure to urbanites used to the crowded environment of the center city.

The area around Bryn Mawr station enjoyed growing popularity as a weekend and vacation retreat for wealthy Philadelphians in need of respite from urban life. Hundreds of Philadelphia's wealthiest urban white citizens had purchased land in expensive new real estate developments along the Main Line and Mill Creek. Bryn Mawr reportedly contained 21 houses in 1858; by 1884, it contained more than 300 in 1884.⁵⁸ Real estate prices rapidly rose as a result of the increasing popularity of the Bryn Mawr area. These houses cost about fifty percent more than row homes in the urban sector or in an industrial section.⁵⁹ Those who did not own property in the area would often stay at the Bryn Mawr Hotel, overlooking the picturesque vistas of Mill Creek (Fig. 17).⁶⁰ In the year that Eakins was commissioned to paint *Swimming*, a notice in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* notes that all the rooms for the hotel were engaged by June.⁶¹

Eakins had some access to this elite culture through his contact with the trustees at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Within a year of the painting's completion, both Edward Hornor Coates, the patron of *Swimming*, and his brother, George Morrison Coates, purchased property in the area around Dove Lake (Fig. 18). In November 1885, while *Swimming* was still on view at the Academy, George purchased a tract of land from

⁵⁸Alison Janet Reed, "The Bryn Mawr Hotel: The Relationship Between the Main Line of the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Nineteenth-Century Resort Hotel" (M.S. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1989): 100-41.

⁵⁹Marsh, "Residential Decentralization," 111.

⁶⁰Sarah Cash, "Friendly and Unfriendly," 49.

⁶¹"Bryn Mawr Hotel: Who Will Summer at This Beautiful Suburban Retreat," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* Vol. CX (June 2, 1884): 2.

James Raymond Claghorn, son of Pennsylvania Academy president James L. Claghorn. In 1886, Edward Coates himself purchased a tract of land adjacent to that surrounding Dove Lake.⁶² The land purchase indicates that Eakins' patron had some familiarity with painting's setting, and would have recognized the landscape surrounding the ruins even without the inclusion of specific topographical features. Perhaps Eakins' patron was the one to suggest the location as a potential site for the painting.

Despite the apparent popularity of the Bryn Mawr Hotel for summer boarders, some parcels of land along the Bryn Mawr Tract continued to be on the real estate market into the 1880s.⁶³ More frequent commuter trains would soon fix this, and change the nature of suburban development in Lower Merion. In 1884, service along the Main Line increased to over thirty trains per day.⁶⁴ Coupled with lower rates, these convenient schedules allowed regular commuting and permitted middle-class families to move into the suburbs. Many of the existing lots in the area were subdivided to offer more affordable properties to this burgeoning market. Although large and expensive estates continued to be built, much of the new construction was aimed at middle-class families.⁶⁵ In selecting this particular site in 1884 as the setting for *Swimming*, Eakins simultaneously engages multiple processes of transformation. His work speaks to the disappearance of rural industry as the moneyed classes moved outward from the center city. *Swimming* also points to the democratizing of the influence of the railroad,

⁶²Purchased from John B. Wood on October 30, 1886. Cash, "Friendly and Unfriendly," 50-51.

⁶³Reed, "The Bryn Mawr Hotel," 107-108.

⁶⁴The Lower Merion Historical Society, *The First 300*, 74.

⁶⁵Ibid.

depicting a crucial moment when the middle class was becoming incorporated in previously gentrified spaces.

Suburban Fraternity

Many of these new residential commuters established male fraternal organizations—some with corresponding women’s branches—to establish a sense of cohesiveness in the suburbs. The expansion of such groups illustrated the need for people to maintain a community in an increasingly impersonal environment. They also demonstrated the inability of work or neighborhood to fulfill that need.⁶⁶ The homogenous group of figures in *Swimming* seems to intimate a fraternal order, yet their recreation is held outside of a rigid social structure. Their fraternal relationship appears closely akin to the democratic, brotherly love that is the city’s namesake.⁶⁷ The choice of activity seems to subvert exclusive organizations. The kind of riparian recreation depicted in *Swimming* did not require membership or economic affluence; it could be undertaken spontaneously and was within the means of a wide segment of the population.

On the surface, it would seem that homogenous group of figures in *Swimming* both record and naturalize the changing social landscape around Mill Creek. Yet they also complicate this landscape. The figures depicted are not drawn from the more entrenched fraternal organizations. Rather, they represent middle class day trippers from the city whose presence marks a transition to a moment of wider accessibility made possible by the railroad’s lower fares. The figures act to signal a shift in the composition of the social landscape in Philadelphia’s suburbs. Simultaneously, these nudes maintain their historical associations. Egalitarian leisure in the present is thus aligned with a

⁶⁶Marsh, “Residential Decentralization,” 115.

⁶⁷Philadelphia is a compound of *philos* (love) and *adelphos* (brother).

democratizing moment at the nation's founding. The mode of nostalgic recreation serves to justify the presence of the day trippers in the painting and, by extension, the growing presence of middle class suburbanites. *Swimming* gestures to the increasingly complex contest between social groups in the outer city.

CONCLUSION

While earlier scholarship has centered on the personal, professional, and cultural identities of the figures within the painting, this thesis has instead considered the ways in which the activity of the figures within the space of the painting to inform larger cultural interpretations of the suburban landscape in which the work is set. *Swimming* pictures a moment caught between two historically-specific community forms. While the earlier rural moment had been characterized by accessibility and egalitarian leisure, the later suburban moment was defined by exclusive recreation and class homogeneity. Set near Bryn Mawr, the suburb most aggressively promoted by the Pennsylvania Railroad, the painting encapsulates the tension between an imagined pastoral past and a modern state of metropolitan interconnectedness. The railroad was central to this interconnectedness, intimately linking the outer city with the urban center.

Swimming uses the rich associations of its setting to layer different moments and conceptions of time and thus visualize the process of the landscape's temporal change. Signifiers of the area's ancient and colonial pasts are layered within the present, marking the rapid pace of development in the nation's first hundred years. The work captures a scene still in transition, thus positing the realization of a future moment in the present. The rapid cycle of development continues as an upper class retreat, still in the process of erasing signs of earlier rural industry, is superseded by the resettlement of the middle class in newly accessible commuter suburbs. In invoking different kinds of time,

Swimming addresses the dialectical anxiety of trying to locate the city's future in its present.

Swimming acts as a lens through which to understand the conflicted moment of its production. Though specific to the suburbs of Philadelphia, the painting articulates themes relevant to the growing suburbs of other metropolitan centers in the United States at a time of rapid urbanization. *Swimming* both naturalizes the evolving landscape of Philadelphia's outer city and complicates it, balancing contradictory impulses to maintain an uneasy equilibrium. The work holds in tension motion and stasis, tradition and innovation, and old country and new city life. In portraying the features of the landscape that were most in flux, Eakins captured the discord inherent in this moment of transition. The painting engages the defining characteristics of modernity by visualizing the process of change. Through the specific reality of its setting, *Swimming* reveals the anxieties of rapid transformation in modern American life.



Fig. 1. Thomas Eakins, *Swimming*, 1884-85. Oil on canvas, 27 ⁵/₁₆ x 36 ⁵/₁₆ in. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, TX.

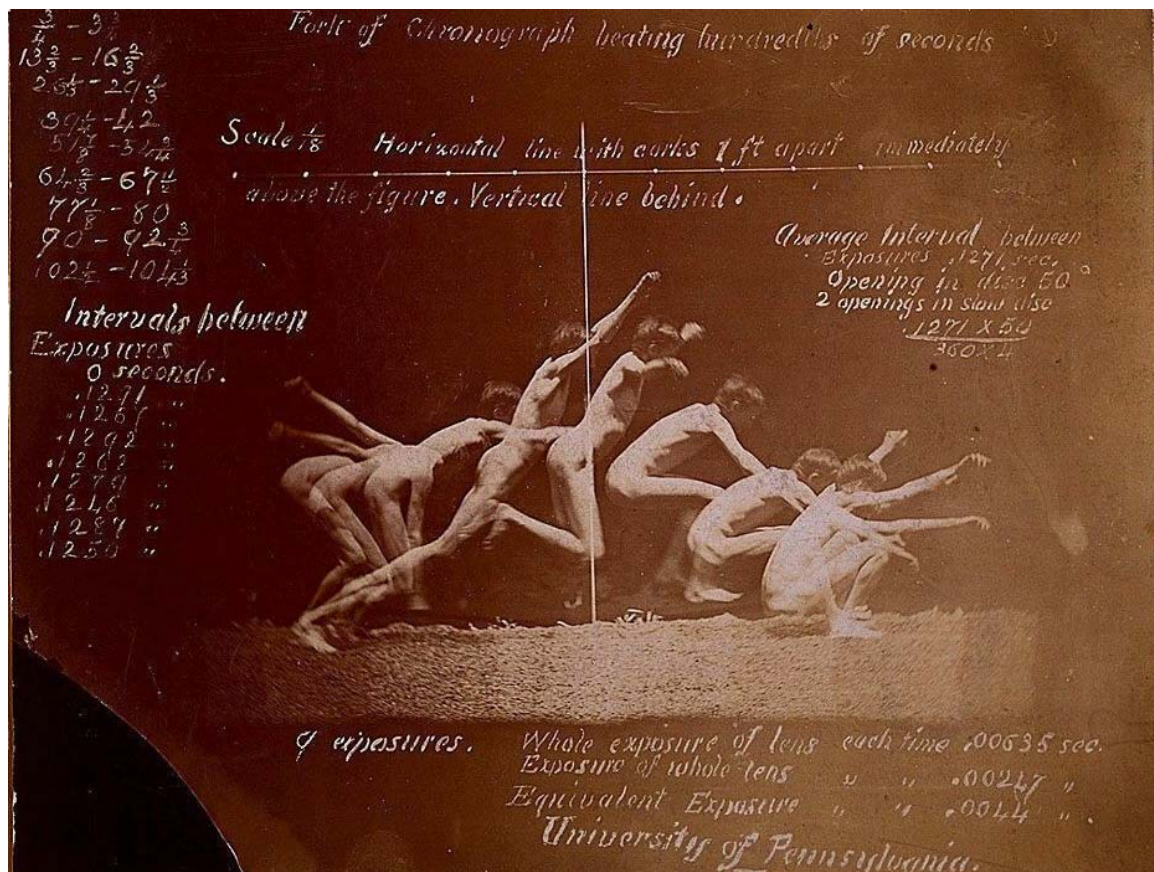


Fig. 2. Thomas Eakins, *Marey Wheel Photographs of Unidentified Model, with Eadweard Muybridge Notations*, 1884. Gelatin silver print on paper, 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 3. Thomas Eakins, *A May Morning in the Park (The Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand)*, 1879-80. Oil on canvas, 23 ³/₄ x 36 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.



Fig. 4. Thomas Eakins, *Singing a Pathetic Song*, 1881. Oil on canvas, 45 x 32 ½ in. The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 5. Thomas Eakins, *Arcadia*, ca. 1883. Oil on canvas, 38 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 45 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 6. Thomas Eakins, *An Arcadian*, ca. 1883. Oil on canvas, 14 x 18 in. Estate of Lloyd Goodrich.



Fig. 7. *Dying Gaul*, ca. 230-220 BCE. Roman marble copy after a Hellenistic bronze original from Pergamon, Turkey, approx. 3 ft. high. Museo Capitolino, Roma.



Fig. 8. Map showing Schultz Mill. Scull & Heap map of Philadelphia and its environs by George Heap (c. 1715-1752). Reproduced in *The First 300* (Ardmore, PA: The Lower Merion Historical Society, 2000), 11.

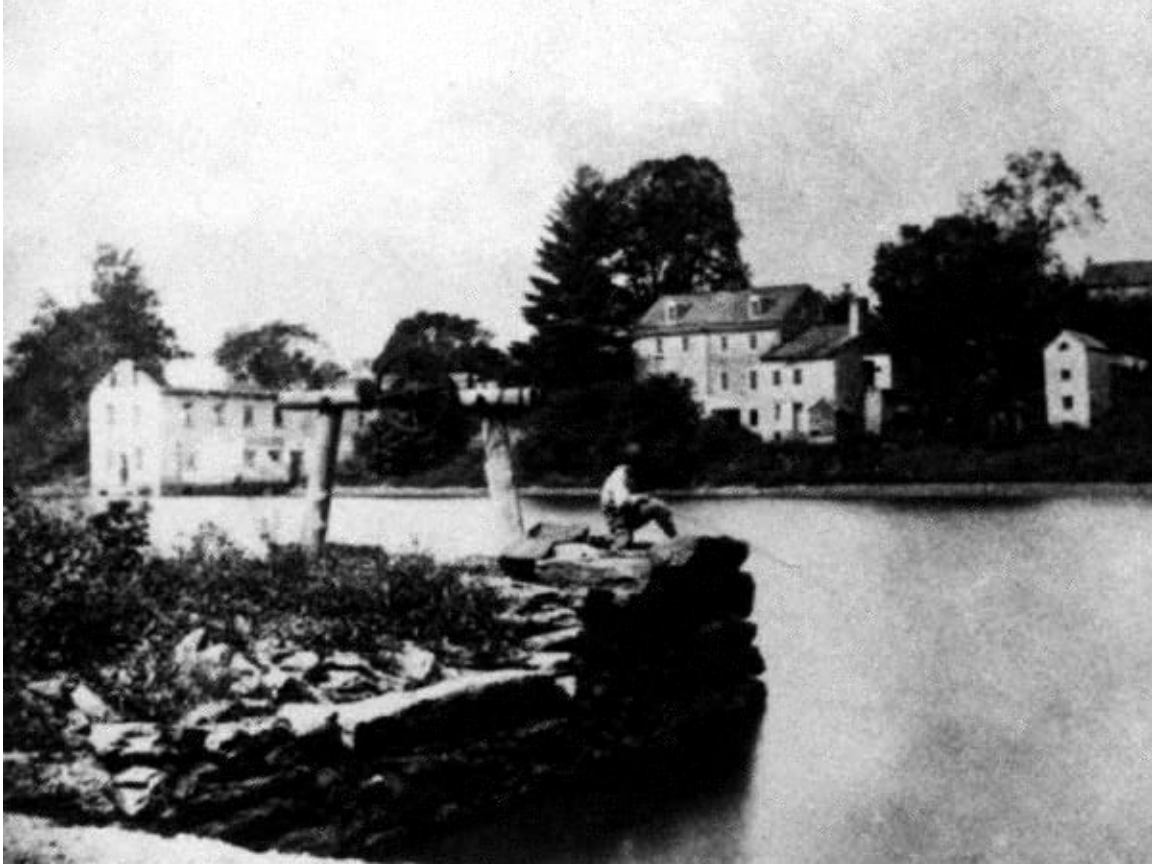


Fig. 9. John Browne, *Dove Lake Mill*, ca. 1878. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, TX.



Fig. 10. William E. Winner, *View of the Dove Mills*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 22 x 29 in., Gladwyne Free Library, Gladwyne, PA. Reproduced in *Thomas Eakins and the Swimming Picture* (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum, 1996), 50.



Fig. 11. Thomas Eakins, *Study for Swimming*, ca. 1883-84. Reproduced in *The Photographs of Thomas Eakins* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972), no. 42.



Fig. 12. Thomas Eakins, *Study for Swimming*, ca. 1883-84. Reproduced in *The Photographs of Thomas Eakins* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972), no. 43.



Fig. 13. Thomas Eakins, *Study for Swimming*, ca. 1883-84. Reproduced in *The Photographs of Thomas Eakins* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972), no. 44.

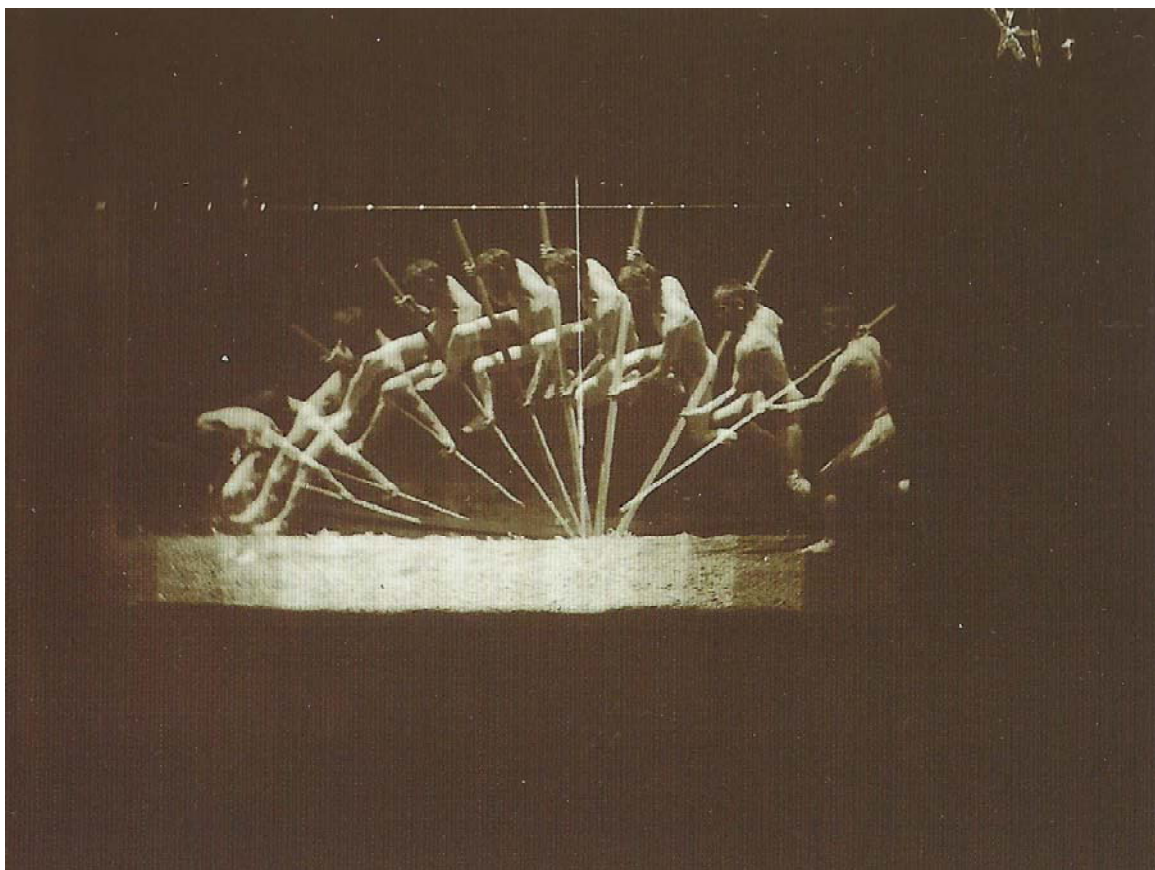


Fig. 14. Thomas Eakins, *Motion Study: George Reynolds, Nude, Pole-Vaulting*, 1885. Gelatin dry-plate negative, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia.



Fig. 15. Thomas Eakins, *The Champion Single Sculls (Max Schmitt in a Single Scull)*, 1871. Oil on canvas, 32 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 46 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 16. Georges Seurat, *Bathers at Asnières*, 1884. Oil on canvas, 79 × 118 in. The National Gallery, London.



Fig. 17. *Bryn Mawr Hotel*. From *Suburban Stations and Rural Homes of the Pennsylvania Railroad* (Philadelphia: Office of the General Passenger Agent, 1874).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Academy Exhibition. Fifty-sixth Annual Display of Pictures and Other Works. An Unusually Varied and Interesting Collection, with Many Masterpieces of Contemporary American Artists, at Home and Abroad.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 29, 1885, 2.

Alewitz, Sam. *“Filthy Dirty”: A Social History of Unsanitary Philadelphia in the Late Nineteenth Century*. New York: Garland, 1989.

Atlas of Properties along the Pennsylvania R.R. Embracing Two Miles each side of the road and from Overbrook to Malvern Sta., Compiled From Official Records Private Plans and Actual Surveys by G.W.M. Baist, Topographical Engineer. Philadelphia: J.L. Smith, 1887.

“At Private View: First Impressions of the Autumn Exhibition at the Academy of the Fine Arts.” *The Times (Philadelphia)*, October 29, 1885, 2.

“Baths and Bathing Places,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* Vol. CIII (July 9, 1880): 2.

Bean, Theodore W., ed. *The History of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: Everts & Peck, 1889.

Berger, Martin. *Man Made: Thomas Eakins and the Construction of Gilded Age Manhood*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

-----, “Modernity and Gender in Thomas Eakins’s ‘Swimming.’” *American Art* 11.3 (Autumn 1997): 32-47.

Berman, Marshall. *All the is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.

Bolger, Doreen and Sarah Cash, ed. *Thomas Eakins and the Swimming Picture*. Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum, 1996.

Braddock, Alan C. “Bodies of Water: Thomas Eakins, Racial Ecology, and the Limits of Civic Realism.” In *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, edited by Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher, 129-150. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009.

-----, *Thomas Eakins and the Cultures of Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

“Bryn Mawr Hotel: Who Will Summer at This Beautiful Suburban Retreat,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* Vol. CX (June 2, 1884): 2.

Burns, Sarah. "Ordering the Artist's Body: Thomas Eakins's Acts of Self-Portrayal." *American Art* (Spring 2005), 83-107.

Clark, T.J. *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Danly, Susan, and Leibold, Cheryl. *Eakins and the Photograph: Work by Thomas Eakins and His Circle in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.

Domit, Moussa M. *The Sculpture of Thomas Eakins*. Washington, D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969.

Duke, R. T. W. "In Arcadia." *Century Illustrated Magazine* Vol. XXIX, No. 1 (November 1884): 157.

Field, Hamilton E. *The Arts* 1 (February – March 1921): 45.

Finkel, Kenneth. *Nineteenth-Century Photography in Philadelphia*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1980.

Fishman, Robert. *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1987.

Foster, Kathleen A., ed. *A Drawing Manual by Thomas Eakins*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005.

Foster, Kathleen A., and Leibold, Cheryl, *Writing About Eakins: The Manuscripts in Charles Bregler's Thomas Eakins Collection*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.

"Franklin Had Scheme Aimed at Bogus Bills." *Main Line Times* (Ardmore, PA), October 18, 1979.

Goodrich, Lloyd. *Thomas Eakins*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press for the National Gallery of Art, 1982.

Hendricks, Gordon. "A May Morning in the Park." *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 60.285 (Spring 1965): 48-64.

----- *The Photographs of Thomas Eakins*. New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972.

Homer, William Innes and Aaron Scharf. "Concerning Muybridge, Marey, and Seurat." *The Burlington Magazine* 104.714 (September 1962): 391-393.

Homer, William Innes. "Eakins, Muybridge, and the Motion Picture Process." *The Art Quarterly* 26.2 (Summer 1963): 194-216.

-----, *Thomas Eakins, His Life and Art*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1992.

"I. Layton Register Dies Suddenly." *Ardmore Chronicle*, October 4, 1913.

Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Johns, Elizabeth. *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Leja, Michael. "Eakins and Icons." *The Art Bulletin* 83.3 (September 2001): 479-497.

-----, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Marceau, Henri Gabriel. "The 'Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand.'" *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 26.138 (January 1931): 20-25.

Marsh, Margaret. "Suburbanization and the Search for Community: Residential Decentralization in Philadelphia, 1880-1900." *Pennsylvania History* Vol. 44 No. 2 (April 1977): 101.

McCarthy, Michael P. *Typhoid and the Politics of Public Health in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1989.

Mileaf, Janine A. "Poses for the Camera: Eadweard Muybridge's Studies of the Human Figure." *American Art* 16.3 (Autumn 2002): 30-53.

Miller, Angela. *Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Miller, Leslie W. "Art. The Awards of Prizes at the Academy." *American* 274 (November 7, 1885): 45.

Milroy, Elizabeth. *Guide to the Thomas Eakins Research Collection with a Lifetime Exhibition Record and Bibliography*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1996.

Muybridge, Eadweard, et al. *Animal Locomotion: The Muybridge Work at the University of Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1888.

Panofsky, E. "'Et in Arcadia Ego': Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition." In *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, edited Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 257-262.

Parry, Ellwood C., III. "Thomas Eakins's 'Naked Series' Reconsidered: Another Look at the Standing Nude Photographs Made for the Use of Eakins's Students." *American Art Journal* (Spring 1988), 53-77.

Reason, Akela. *Thomas Eakins and the Uses of History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.

Reed, Alison Janet. "The Bryn Mawr Hotel: The Relationship Between the Main Line of the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Nineteenth-Century Resort Hotel." M.S. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1989.

Riley, James Whitcomb. "In Swimming-time." *Century Illustrated Magazine* Vol. XXVI, No. 5 (September 1883): 798.

Riley, James Whitcomb. "The Old Swimmin'-Hole." In *The Complete Poetical Works of James Whitcomb Riley* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 246.

Scharf, Aaron. "Painting, Photography, and the Image of Movement." *The Burlington Magazine* 104.710 (May 1962): 186, 188-195.

Smith's Handbook and Guide in Philadelphia. Philadelphia: George Delp & Co., 1870.

Sewell, Darrell, et al. *Thomas Eakins*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001.

Sewell, Darrell. *Thomas Eakins: Artist of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1982.

Siegl, Theodor. *The Thomas Eakins Collection*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1978.

Simpson, Marc. "Thomas Eakins and His Arcadian Works," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, 1.2 (Autumn 1987): 71-95.

Sipes, William. *The Pennsylvania Railroad: Its Origin, Construction, Condition, and Connections*. Philadelphia: The Passenger Department, 1875.

Stilgoe, John R. *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Suburban Stations and Rural Homes on the Pennsylvania Railroad. Philadelphia: Office of the General Passenger Agent, 1874.

"The Art of Swimming: How to Acquire Proficiency and Skill in the Exercise," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* Vol. CVII (August 11, 1882): 2.

The Lower Merion Historical Society. *The First 300: The Amazing and Rich History of Lower Merion*. Collingdale, PA: Diane Publishing Co., 2000.

Werbel, Amy. *Thomas Eakins: Art Medicine, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Wiltse, Jesse. *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Yablon, Nick. *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819-1919*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009.

“Ye Old Grist Mill.” *Ardmore Chronicle*, July 13, 1907.